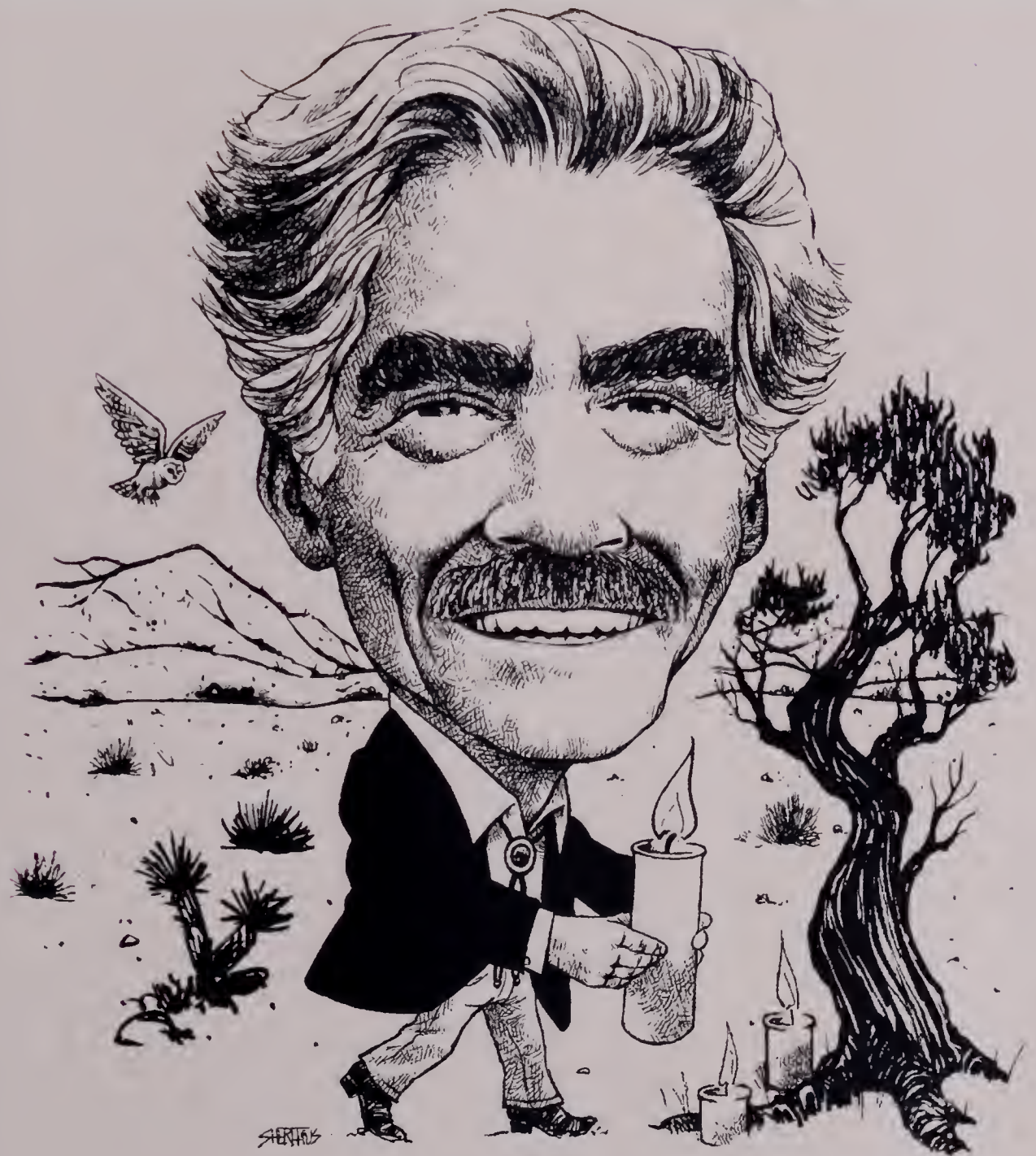


National Endowment for the Arts

TEACHER'S GUIDE



RUDOLFO ANAYA'S

Bless Me, Ultima



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
FOR THE ARTS



THE **BIG
READ**

Rudolfo Anaya's

Bless Me, Ultima

TEACHER'S GUIDE



The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation's largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.



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THE CLASSIC BY
RUDOLFO ANAYA
Author of *Albuquerque*

**BLESS ME,
ULTIMA**



"ONE OF THE NATION'S FOREMOST
CHICANO LITERARY ARTISTS."
—*Denver Post*

WARNER BOOKS

"I was happy with Ultima. We walked together in the llano and along the river banks to gather herbs and roots for her medicines....She taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time. My soul grew under her careful guidance."

—Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima*

Introduction



Photo by Vance Jacobs

Welcome to the Big Read, a major initiative from the National Endowment for the Arts. Designed to revitalize the role of literary reading in American culture, the Big Read hopes to unite communities through great literature, as well as inspire students to become life-long readers.

This Big Read Teacher's Guide contains ten lessons to lead you through Rudolfo Anaya's classic novel, *Bless Me, Ultima*. Each lesson has four sections: focus topic, discussion activities, writing exercises, and homework assignments. In addition, we have provided capstone projects and suggested essay topics, as well as handouts with more background information about the novel, the historical period, and the author. All lessons dovetail with the state language arts standards required in the fiction genre.

The Big Read teaching materials also include a CD. Packed with interviews, commentaries, and excerpts from the novel, the Big Read CD presents first-hand accounts of why Anaya's novel remains so compelling three decades after its initial publication. Some of America's most celebrated writers, scholars, and actors have volunteered their time to make these Big Read CDs exciting additions to the classroom.

Finally, the Big Read Reader's Guide deepens your exploration with interviews, booklists, timelines, and historical information. We hope this guide and syllabus allow you to have fun with your students while introducing them to the work of a great American author.

From the NEA, we wish you an exciting and productive school year.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Dana Gioia". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dana" and last name "Gioia" clearly distinguishable.

Dana Gioia
Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts

Suggested Teaching Schedule

1

Day One

FOCUS: Biography

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD. Create a biographical portrait of Anaya and describe the New Mexican landscape.

Homework: Chapters *Uno* and *Dos* (pp. 1-26).*

2

Day Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Activities: Listen to the Big Read CD and read Handouts One and Three. Discuss the multicultural nature of New Mexican heritage, and the ways the Spanish and native cultures both conflict and coincide. Write about myths in your own culture.

Homework: Chapters *Tres*, *Cuatro*, and *Cinco* (pp. 27-50).

3

Day Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

Activities: Discuss and write about the many influences on Antonio's point of view, examining how the beliefs of other characters affect his thinking.

Homework: Chapters *Seis*, *Siete*, *Ocho*, *Nueve* (pp. 51-82).

4

Day Four

FOCUS: Characters

Activities: Read Handout Two. Discuss the ways language creates character, and write about the confusion Antonio encounters as he tries to find his place in a grown-up world.

Homework: Chapter *Diez* (pp. 83-105).

5

Day Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Activities: Discuss how Anaya describes the earth with human traits. Write a paragraph using figurative language.

Homework: Chapters *Once*, *Doce*, and *Trece* (pp. 106-142).

* Page numbers refer to the Warner Books, 1994, edition of *Bless Me, Ultima*.

6

Day Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Activities: Analyze the symbolism of Ultima's owl, the river, and the golden carp.

Homework: Chapter *Catorce* (pp. 143-176).

7

Day Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Activities: Discuss the ways in which the roles of Andrew, Narciso, and Tenorio change in the novel. Write about what Antonio learns concerning the strange ways of men.

Homework: Chapters *Quince*, *Dieciséis*, and *Diecisiete* (pp. 177-202).

8

Day Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

Activities: Discuss the sad and terrifying events that unfold quickly in the previous night's reading. Write about patterns of repetition and variation in the plot.

Homework: Chapters *Dieciocho*, *Diecinueve*, and *Veinte* (pp. 203-235).

9

Day Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Activities: Discuss themes of innocence and knowledge, nature, and language and identity.

Homework: Chapters *Veintiuno* and *Veintidós* (pp. 236-262).

10

Day Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Activities: Explore the qualities of a great novel.

Homework: Work on essays.

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novel.

Rudolfo Anaya was raised on the edge of the New Mexican plains, surrounded by gullies and hills, mesquite and juniper trees. He spent summers playing along the river and the rest of the year studying at a school in town. Anaya grew up with his sisters. Three older brothers fought overseas in World War II. His father worked on ranches as a cowboy or *vaquero* while his mother stayed home to raise the family. They moved to the barrios of Albuquerque when Anaya was a teenager. Here, he began to explore the pueblos and understand his Native American roots.

Growing up as a Mexican-American in the 1940s and 1950s, Anaya reflects the multicultural and spiritual heritage of New Mexico. He says:

We believe the region is a spiritual corridor; the earth nurtures us, and our deities can be invoked for the good of the community. Here, Native Americans have been saying prayers and keeping the world in balance for thousands of years. It's difficult to make a living here, but beneath the daily struggle there exists a fulfilling spiritual sense. This is a sacred space for us. (Warner Books trade paperback, p. 285).



Discussion Activities

Listen to the CD and read Anaya's interview in the Reader's Guide (pp. 10-11). Have each student recall one interesting thing he or she heard on the CD or read in the interview, and then explain why that detail or statement captured his or her attention. Then have the class collaborate to create a biographical portrait of Anaya. What do we know about him? What kind of man is he? What are the most important events in his life? How might they have motivated him?



Writing Exercise

Have students view images of the New Mexican landscape such as the one in the Reader's Guide. Have students write a poem or a paragraph that captures and describes the emotional tone of this landscape. What kind of place does it appear to be? How does the viewer feel, looking at the photograph?



Homework

Read Chapters *Uno* and *Dos*. What do Antonio's dreams reveal about his personality, his fears and his desires?

Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the heart of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating the intricate details of the time and place can assist us in comprehending the motivations of the characters. In this lesson, use cultural and historical contexts to begin to explore the novel.

The novel embraces myths from New Mexican cultures. *Bless Me, Ultima* presents myths, magic, and miracles on many levels, drawn from Spanish and Catholic traditions, as well as from native peoples who lived in New Mexico long before the conquistadors and their priests arrived from Europe. The survival of these myths from various traditions testifies to New Mexico's multicultural heritage, borne out of long struggles among disparate peoples who fought for centuries over land, religion, and sovereignty.

At the end of World War II, America modernized rapidly and the *vaquero* culture began to disappear. Mass production drew rural people away from farming to jobs in the cities. The G.I. Bill offered promise of social and geographic mobility by providing college education and housing to returning soldiers. Yet post-war America was also full of threats. The Cold War intensified between the United States and the Soviet Union, as a nuclear arms race escalated international tensions. New Mexico served as a testing and development site for these weapons, shrouded in mystery and secrecy. Like much of the rest of America, New Mexicans struggled to retain cultural traditions while meeting the demands of post-World War II society.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the CD—What is a *curandera*, and what is her role in the pueblo communities of New Mexico? How does this approach to healing compare with your beliefs about illness and healing?

Distribute Handout One and Handout Three. Ask the students to discuss the history of New Mexico as one of both cultural conflict and cultural exchange. Where do the religious beliefs of Catholic explorers and Native Americans overlap? Where do they diverge?

Writing Exercise

Have students identify important myths in their own cultures, either local or national. Invite them to write an essay that recounts a myth in their own words, and then discuss what religious or cultural values the myth addresses. Why is this story useful or meaningful in their culture?

Homework

Read Chapters *Tres*, *Cuatro*, and *Cinco*. Why does Antonio's uncle say that there is hope for the young protagonist?

Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. The narrator can be a major or minor character within the novel. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into the telling of the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel using “I.” A distanced narrator (often not a character) does not participate in the events of the story and uses third person (he, she, they) to narrate the story. The distanced narrator can be omniscient, able to read the minds of all characters within the novel. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

Bless Me, Ultima is narrated by Antonio from the first-person point of view. We see and experience all the novel’s events through Antonio’s eyes. Antonio is very young when the story opens, only six years old. His point of view remains limited because he does not fully understand much about the world, especially why people act as they do. Antonio’s narration is at times observant and at times perplexed about what he sees and hears. He narrates the novel in English and Spanish, moving between the two languages while discovering his multicultural identity. He learns about the spirituality of Catholicism from his mother, and the spirituality of nature from Ultima. He inherits the dream of freedom from his father and brothers. His point of view and narration move among these influences, which sometimes conflict.

Discussion Activities

As he tells the story, how does Antonio make sense of the conflicts he encounters? Does he seem to prefer the world and viewpoint of his mother and her brothers, his father and the *vaqueros*, Ultima, or some other influence? What about each of these points of view appeals to Antonio, makes him feel curious, excited, or secure? Which of these influences seems dominant in his eyes? What things in particular are confusing from Antonio’s point of view, either for him or for the reader?

Writing Exercise

Write a paragraph that compares and contrasts Antonio’s life inside the house, with his mother and Ultima, with the life he lives outside the house, first introduced on the riverbank in Chapter *Dos*, and later at his uncle’s. How, if at all, do these two worlds overlap or intersect?

Homework

Read Chapters *Seis*, *Siete*, *Ocho*, and *Nueve*. Ask the students to think about the role of religion in their lives, or in the lives of people to whom they are close. How do God and morality shape Antonio? How does our sense of God and belief in what is right and wrong shape who we are?

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in the attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The first chapter of *Bless Me, Ultima* sets up the friction between Antonio’s mother’s priorities in life and his father’s priorities. We expect that the novel will require Antonio to choose between these two ways of life. The first chapter introduces Ultima to the family, and her influence on Antonio’s life.

Ultima’s magic and her natural healing stand as an antagonist to Antonio’s faith in the church and the sovereign power of priests. Narciso models a certain kind of heroism for Antonio, although he is not respected because of his drinking. When Tenorio asserts himself as Ultima’s enemy, his vow of revenge establishes a new antagonist for Antonio, who fervently defends Ultima’s magic.



Discussion Activities

What does Antonio learn from his brothers and the boys at school about how to become a man? Why might they be incomplete models for him?

Distribute Handout Two. Have the class discuss the use of Spanish in the novel as it reveals important information about certain characters, and the ability of Antonio’s character to communicate with these different voices. Why is Antonio so intimidated by English at school? How does language shape identity in this book?



Writing Exercise

Early in the novel, Ultima tells Antonio: “The ways of men are strange, and hard to learn” (p. 25). Choose one of the characters from the novel and write a paragraph about the character that illustrates what Ultima might mean. How are the ways of men “strange” and why are they hard to learn?

Describe someone in your life who has influenced your beliefs. How do the ideas of this person work with, or conflict with, the influences of other people in your life? How do you reconcile any conflicts among these influences?



Homework

Read Chapter Diez. What do you think of Ultima’s cure?

Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers often use non-literal language to invite readers to visualize events, view internal conflicts, glimpse social themes, or grasp abstract concepts like beauty, truth, or goodness. An author uses figurative or non-literal language to stretch our imaginations, challenging us to decode the references and meanings bound within images, similes, metaphors, and symbols. Such devices require a reader to participate actively in the novel, as the reader begins to (implicitly or explicitly) interpret non-literal elements of the tale.

Sometimes Anaya describes nature as beautiful and benevolent, while at other times it is frightening and dangerous. This language can reflect a character's mood, or foreshadow events.

Anaya especially favors personification, which occurs when a writer attributes a human characteristic to a concept or object:

"[Ultima] taught me to listen to the mystery of the groaning earth and to feel complete in the fulfillment of its time. My soul grew under her careful guidance . . . I had been afraid of the awful presence of the river, which was the soul of the river" (p. 15).

Here is a vivid image from Antonio's dream in Chapter *Nueve*:

"I cried into the bleak landscape in which I found myself. And in the swirling smoke a flash of lightning struck and out of the thunder a dark figure stepped forth" (p. 71).

Anaya also uses similes throughout his novel:

"A man's destiny must unfold itself like a flower, with only the sun and the earth and water making it blossom" (p. 223).



Discussion Activities

What does "groaning earth" convey? How might a *curandera* view our relationship to the land? Why would Anaya choose to portray the world with human traits?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to search the chapters they have read for vivid images. Have them write a paragraph using personification, simile, and metaphor to describe one of those images. Ask them to read their paragraphs aloud. Are there recurring examples of figurative language? What deeper meaning does this repetition suggest?



Homework

Read *Once*, *Doce*, and *Trece*. Why does Antonio's dream at the end of Chapter *Once* bring him peace?

Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object – above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in the novel's title, at the beginning and end of the novel, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



A symbol is a visible object or action that suggests additional meanings. Use this class period to analyze three major symbols in *Bless Me, Ultima*: the river, Ultima's owl, and the golden carp.

Ultima's Owl

"In many cuentos I had heard the owl was one of the disguises a bruja took, and so it struck a chord of fear in the heart to hear them hooting at night. But not Ultima's owl" (p. 13).

Antonio dreams about Ultima's owl the first night of its arrival. The owl cries its warning before Lupito's death in Chapter *Dos*, it comforts Antonio on his first day of school in Chapter *Seis*, and it cries out to Antonio in Chapter *Doce*. In your students' reading tonight, the owl will blind Tenorio in one eye (Chapter *Catorce*). After the novel's violent climax, Antonio discovers the secret of the owl's power.

The River

This mysterious river often figures in Antonio's dreams. It also functions as the venue for a number of events in the story: Lupito falls in the river after his death, Florence drowns in the river, and Antonio witnesses the Golden Carp. How does this element of nature symbolize Antonio's fears?

The Golden Carp

"I could not believe its size. It was bigger than me! And bright orange! The sunlight glistened off his golden scales" (p. 113).

Anaya creates his own myth in the legend of the golden carp. Antonio believes the story, but cannot reconcile it with his Catholicism, confessing, "The roots of everything I had ever believed in seemed shaken" (p. 81). After he sees the carp's beauty with his own eyes in Chapter *Once*, he wonders if a new religion can blend both the Golden Carp and Catholicism.



Homework

Read Chapter *Catorce*. Despite the differences among the three symbols discussed in this lesson, how does Anaya use them in crucial moments of the plot to probe Antonio's anxieties, doubts, and fears, and therefore develop his character?

Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

Bless Me, Ultima begins with Antonio wondering what he will become, after he dreams about his birth and the fight over his future. The hopes that others have for him send him rushing out of the house: "I felt a cool sweat on my forehead and I knew I had to run, I had to clear my mind of the dream. [...] The white sun and fresh air cleansed me" (pp. 9-10). We, too, wonder what will become of Antonio as we read the novel, and the plot of this book is the story of his character's evolution.



Discussion Activities

Chapter *Catorce* highlights Antonio's place among various men in the novel. Discuss how his relationship to these three characters changes in this chapter:

Andrew

Has Andrew become an antagonist for Antonio at this point? What has become of Andrew? How does Andrew fail Antonio, or stand in his way, at a moment of crisis?

Narciso

How does our perception of Narciso change in this chapter? How does his death affect Antonio? What kind of hero has Narciso become?

Tenorio

Tenorio has become a much more prominent antagonist in the novel. Why is he so violently driven by his vow of revenge? What causes Tenorio to suffer? Do you see any parallels between Tenorio's and Antonio's grief, or do they suffer for different reasons?



Writing Exercise

Return to Ultima's earlier assertion that the ways of men are "strange and hard to learn." Write a paragraph that looks back at this question from the end of Chapter *Catorce*. What has Antonio learned since the beginning of the novel? Are any of the ways of men becoming less confusing to him? Are any becoming more confusing?



Homework

Read Chapters *Quince*, *Dieciséis*, and *Diecisiete*. Review the essay on Catholicism as supplemental reading to the narration of Antonio's First Communion. What is the significance of this ceremony for him?

Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author artfully builds a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and inform character development. The timing of events, from beginning, to middle, to end, can make a novel predictable or riveting. A plot, propelled by a crisis, will reach a climax, and close with a resolution (sometimes called *dénouement*). Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy time while telling the story. A successful author will keep a reader entranced by clever pacing built within the tale, sometimes confounding a simple plot by telling stories within stories.

The plot of *Bless Me, Ultima* unfolds episodically and the tension builds as the reader wonders how Tenorio's attempts to avenge the death of his daughter will play out. Many events in the novel have a dramatic impact on Antonio. His initiation into the often cruel world of adults is marked by his furtive observation of Lupito's murder, his first day of school, and his discovery of Andrew at Rosie's house. By contrast, his summers with Ultima and on his uncles' farm form a rhythm of peace and happiness that counterbalances the discovery of awful truths. Antonio's spiritual development is profoundly affected by the appearance of the golden carp, Ultima's cure of his uncle, his first communion, and Narciso's request that Antonio hear his confession as he dies.



Discussion Activities

Ask students to consider the events of the three chapters they just read. The death of Narciso affects Antonio profoundly, and the tension increases with this murder. Then the brothers return but leave quickly, this time taking Andrew with them. Antonio has been looking forward to his first communion, but the ceremony leaves him feeling disappointed. Invite the class to discuss this series of events. What has changed after the murder of Narciso? Do we feel the novel building to a climax at this point? How does the class imagine that these conflicts and disappointments will be resolved in the end?



Writing Exercise

A few events occur more than once. Examples of these patterns include Antonio's dreams, Ultima's healing rituals, Antonio's direct encounters with death, and the arrival and departure of summer. Select one of these repeating events and write a paragraph that compares and contrasts two or three instances.



Homework

Read *Dieciocho*, *Diecinueve*, and *Veinte*. Why might the boys insist that Antonio play the priest?

Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Profound questions raised by the story allow the character (and the reader) to explore the meaning of human life, and extract themes. Themes investigate topics explored for centuries by philosophers, politicians, scientists, historians, and theologians. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, personal moral code in relation to political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational commitments. A novel can shed light on these age-old debates, by creating new situations to challenge and explore human nature.

Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel. Using references to support ideas, explore the ideas *Bless Me, Ultima* suggests about the following:



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Innocence and Knowledge

Antonio wonders about the nature of innocence, and how knowledge affects it. He recognizes that knowledge is a form of power:

I wondered if the knowledge I sought would destroy me. But it couldn't, it was God's knowledge—
Did we ask too much when we asked to share His knowledge?
(p. 191)

Is it better to be innocent or to have knowledge, if comprehension of death, misery, revenge, and anger leads to pain? Is ignorance bliss, or is it misery?

Nature

Antonio is powerfully affected by the natural landscape. His emotions are linked to the sky and the weather, a poetic technique known as pathetic fallacy. What do certain symbols in nature (the river, the juniper tree, and the uncles' farm) suggest about our relation to the natural world? Does nature seem like a cruel, benevolent, or indifferent force? How does respect or irreverence for nature contribute to human feelings, and how does this emerge in the story?

Language and Identity

Why does Antonio believe that words are magic? What roles do curses, vows, confessions, and prayers play in the lives of these characters, and in our ability to cope with suffering? How does language provide comic relief, as in the Christmas play? What does the novel's use of Spanish help us to understand about the characters, and Antonio's identity among them?



Homework

Finish reading the novel, Chapters *Veintiuno* and *Veintidós*. Where does the end of the novel leave Antonio? What has he learned? How has he grown older or wiser through the course of these events?

Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Great Book?

Novels illustrate the connections between individuals and questions of humanity. Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives, while painting those conflicts in the larger picture of human struggle. Readers forge bonds with the story as the writer's voice, style, and sense of poetry inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities for learning, imagining, and reflecting, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changing lives, challenging assumptions, and breaking new ground.



Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Put these on the board. What elevates a novel to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *Bless Me, Ultima*?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Anaya create through Antonio? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of children and adolescents? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of immigrants and first-generation Americans?

Divide the class into groups and have each one choose the most important theme of the novel. Have a spokesperson from each explain the group's decision. Write these themes on the board. Do all the groups agree?



Writing Exercise

Select one or two things that have changed between the beginning and end of the novel. For example, students could choose a character, a conflict, or our understanding of a particular theme. Have them write a paragraph that discusses how and why this thing has changed over time, and then discuss what they think the significance of this change might be for Antonio, and for the reader.



Homework

Students should work on their essays. See "Essay Topics" in the next section. For additional questions, see the Reader's Guide's "Discussion Questions." Turn in outlines and/or rough drafts for the next class.

Essay Topics

The discussion activities and writing exercises in this guide provide you with possible essay topics, as do the Discussion Questions in the Reader's Guide. Advanced students can come up with their own essay topics, as long as they are specific and compelling. Other ideas for essays are provided here.

For essays, students should organize their ideas around a thesis about the novel. This statement should be focused, with clear reasons supporting its conclusion. The thesis and supporting reasons should be backed by references to the text.

1. On page 123, Antonio says:
"I felt more attached to Ultima than to my own mother. Ultima told me the stories and legends of my ancestors. From her I learned the glory and the tragedy of the history of my people, and I came to understand how that history stirred in my blood."

Explain how Ultima contributes to Antonio's ability to understand an identity of many heritages. What does he learn from Ultima? What does she teach him that his own relatives cannot? What does he mean when he says that "the glory and the tragedy" of his people's history stir in his blood?
2. Anaya has written:
The beliefs of my traditional New Mexican culture are grounded in the Catholic religion and Spanish folktales from the Iberian world. These beliefs are influenced by cultural borrowings from the Pueblo Indian way of life. This culture is the backdrop for the novel. It is the way of life of the Nuevos Mexicanos that inspires my creativity. But a novel is not written to explain a culture, it creates its own. I create stories, so the reader must separate realistic portrayals of the culture from fiction (Warner Books trade paperback, page x).

Write an essay that discusses the ways this novel portrays a world of its own, one that borrows from real culture and history.
3. On page 44, Antonio says there was no saint he loved more than the Virgen de Guadalupe. In his attempt to explain why this icon is so important to him, he says: "God was not always forgiving. He made laws to follow and if you broke them you were punished. The Virgin always forgave."

"God had power. He spoke and the thunder echoed through the skies."

"The Virgin was full of a quiet, peaceful love. [...]"

"But He was a giant man, and she was a woman. She could go to Him and ask Him to forgive you. Her voice was sweet and gentle and with the help of her Son they could persuade the powerful Father to change His mind."

As you think about the male and female characters in the novel, how does this passage help explain the role that gender plays in Antonio's life?
4. Write an essay in which you analyze and discuss the character of Ultima. What does she mean when she tells Antonio that the owl is her spirit, her "bond to the time and harmony of the universe" (p. 260)? What does she seem to know that others do not know? What does she want for Antonio, and how does she help him cope with problems?

Capstone Projects

Teachers may consider the ways in which these activities may be linked to other Big Read community events. Most of these projects could be shared at a local library, a student assembly, or a bookstore.

1. Research the history of New Mexico, with special attention to the movement of various peoples in and out of the state. Create a multimedia (text, images, music) presentation of this history to display in a library or town hall.
2. Identify and research the attraction of New Mexico to various artists, including Anaya, D.H. Lawrence, and Georgia O'Keeffe. Prepare posters that present their lives and works in the context of their time in New Mexico, and have students create paintings or stories that imitate the style of these artists or writers. Hold a sidewalk art fair and invite the community.
3. Identify some of the representations of Mexican-Americans today, both in the national media and locally in your community. Have groups of students each select one of these representations and prepare a short speech discussing the explicit and implicit messages about Mexican-Americans conveyed by this reference, and then invite the community to a town meeting where the students give their presentations and lead a discussion about contemporary attitudes toward Latinos in local and national culture.
4. Have the students write a play or scene that addresses some aspect of religious or spiritual conflict they see at work today, either globally or locally. Have them perform the scene or play for the community, and then lead a discussion about the various roles religion and spirituality play for them.
5. Have students research some of the herbs and plants mentioned in the novel, both as features of the New Mexican landscape and as elements of traditional healing methods. Students can present their findings as a poster session, open to the community. If possible, introduce a local healer or shaman to the class and invite that person to give a talk at the poster session about contemporary natural healers.
6. Re-read the myth of the Golden Carp that Samuel tells Antonio in Chapter *Nueve*, and the prophecy that Cico tells Antonio in Chapter *Once*. The power of the myth and Antonio's vision of the Golden Carp force him to question his faith in the singular God of Catholicism. Write your own myth about an event of breathtaking beauty. Focus on your skills of descriptive writing to make your reader believe that this phenomenon could really be divine. What is the backstory that explains this beautiful event? Does the story address any issues of sin, justice, fear, punishment, or redemption? Share the myths with a senior group or a local book club.
7. Write a short story set in the future, after Antonio has become an adult. Imagine who Antonio is at that time and how he would react to circumstances. Is he a priest, a farmer, a writer, a healer, a soldier, or something else? Where does he live? Use flashbacks and memories that recall the time of the novel to help explain why you think this future is right for him. Present the stories at a local Big Read event.

New Mexican Catholicism

Throughout *Bless Me, Ultima*, Antonio, a devout Catholic boy, contemplates life as a priest. While regularly praying, he begins his formal religious training in preparation for his First Communion. The Catholic faith, with its intricate doctrine and practices, plays an integral role in Antonio's story.

One of the largest and oldest institutions in the world, the Roman Catholic Church dates to Peter the Apostle in the first century A.D. According to the gospels, Jesus entrusted Peter with the "keys of the kingdom" and gave him special authority to govern the Church. At the end of the fifteenth century, Pope Alexander VI issued a series of papal bulls, or letters, concerning the conversion of the people of the Americas from their native religions to Catholicism.

In what would later become Mexico and the southwestern United States, Spanish priests of the Franciscan Order established missions in the sixteenth century to spread the teachings of the Catholic Church to the indigenous peoples. While many of the native peoples converted, they maintained some of their ancient beliefs. Native practices would come to intermingle with Catholicism.

The Church grants special authority to the pope, his bishops, and their priests, since they belong to the legacy of Jesus' apostles. Catholicism is based on the belief in the Holy Trinity: the Father (God), the Son (Jesus), and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith.

Catholics believe in Seven Sacraments, viewing them as signs of grace and gifts of God. The Sacraments parallel the phases of life: birth, adolescence, marriage, and preparation for death. In Catholicism they are Baptism, Reconciliation

(Confession), Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Anointing of the Sick. A young person is initiated into the Catholic Church through Baptism, usually in infancy, which absolves one of original sin. Children at age seven or eight participate in their First Communion, where they receive the Eucharist for the first time. In the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus Christ are present in the forms of consecrated bread and wine, which Catholics eat and drink during Communion at Mass. In adolescence, a Catholic is "confirmed" by willfully accepting the Catholic faith and its traditions and rituals. As a young Catholic matures, it is important to demonstrate moral fortitude and commitment to Catholic ideals by doing good works. A strong faith means not only understanding the religious tenets of Catholicism, but also acting to reflect those beliefs.

Antonio, as he learns more about his faith, questions what these tenets mean. He is further challenged by what appears to be supernatural — the Golden Carp, Ultima's owl, and Tenorio's daughters. Still, we see the Sacraments infused into *Bless Me, Ultima* when Antonio devotes himself to attending catechism and preparing for his First Communion.

Prior to receiving this sacrament he must take part in Reconciliation, where he confesses his sins, is absolved by the priest, and does penance. On several occasions in the novel Antonio becomes a surrogate priest "absolving" the sins of Narciso and playing priest to the children in his class. He later participates in his First Communion, where he receives the Eucharist. Antonio's spiritual maturity is hastened both by the tragic events he witnesses and the supernatural elements to which he is exposed.

The Spanish Language and the Magic of Words

Language plays an important role in Antonio's life. As he learns to read and write in school, he comes to believe that language has magic: "There was magic in the letters, and I had been eager to learn the secret" (p. 76). The magic they promise is that of wisdom and knowledge, and Antonio hopes that words will reveal to him the mysteries of the world beyond his narrow experience and help shepherd his quest for understanding.

Antonio must operate in two linguistic worlds. Spanish is the language of his home and family, as well as his early understanding of religion, nature, and identity. But when he goes to school, the teacher calls him Anthony instead of Antonio. He must learn to speak, read, and write in English. This language barrier makes him feel alienated and lonely at first, until he makes friends with the other Spanish-speaking boys. For Antonio, English represents the larger American world, full of both excitement and confusion.

The many instances of Spanish vocabulary and dialogue in the novel illustrate the blending of two languages in Antonio's life. Anaya's use of Spanish alongside English helps to define certain characters and emphasize certain ideas and expressions, which defy translation. For readers who do not speak Spanish, the foreign dialogue can make reading the novel confusing or obscure, creating the same feelings of alienation that Antonio feels when he is introduced to English at school.

A Spanish Glossary

abuelo: grandfather

arroyo: stream or brook

ave maria purisima: a prayer meaning, "Hail, purest Mary"

bruja: witch

chango: common term used to describe a young boy, as in "pal" or "buddy"

¡Chinga tu madre!: a curse meaning, "Damn your mother!"

curandera: spiritual healer who uses herbs and traditional healing techniques – inherited from the Indian cultures of Mesoamerica

el Diablo: the Devil

encanto: charm, spell, or enchantment

La Grande: a title of respect granted to Ultima, meaning "The Great Lady"

hechicera: sorceress

hijo / hijos / hijitos: son / children / little children

el hombre volador: the flying man

el llano: the open plain, a flat land used for raising cattle and keeping horses

la luna: the moon

el mar: the sea (the name Márez derives from this word)

¡Madre de Dios!: Mother of God!

¡Mira!: Look!

muerte: death

una mujer: a woman

pecado: sin

¿Qué pasa aquí?: What's going on here?

suerte: fate, destiny, chance, fortune, or luck

Te voy a meter: I will see you die

la tristeza de la vida: the sorrow of life

la vieja: the old woman

The Land of Enchantment

For centuries New Mexico, known as the Land of Enchantment, has drawn travelers and settlers from all directions. The cultures of Native Americans and Spanish Catholics who arrived in the sixteenth century often conflicted. Later, this clash of cultures was further complicated by the introduction of Anglos, who journeyed west after New Mexico became an American territory in 1850. Although these disparate peoples inevitably adopted new ways of living from each other, they also struggled, sometimes violently, to protect their freedom, language, and sovereign traditions. They often fought over land and religion. At other times, native peoples, Spanish, and Anglos coexisted peacefully and harmoniously.

Indigenous peoples have been living in the southwest for thousands of years. The Pueblo Indians of northern New Mexico settled villages of small stone dwellings in what we now call the Four Corners region (where Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah converge). These villages irrigated the land, tended crops, raised fowl, made pottery and woven baskets, and fashioned sophisticated tools from stone. Their lives and art were intimately connected with the seasons and resources of the land. The Navajo people traveled along trade routes, exchanging maize and cotton for bison and other materials. The Navajo believe that life itself is connected to the land, and that a balance between earth, sky, and spiritual people is the source of life. All living things share a common connection among their inner spirit, and this connection gives order to the world.

The freedom to roam the land is an essential aspect of their well-being, and as an expression of their reverence for the land as a sacred being underscores

the independence of the Navajo people, who retained much of their culture after the arrival of the conquistadors. When the Spanish brought sheep and horses up from Mexico, the Navajo people quickly adopted them for their own purposes. The ranchers and nomadic tribes came to share a love and respect for horses and the open land, the *llano*. We see this balance of independence and respect for the land among the Spanish *vaqueros*, the cowboys whose legacy of tough-willed independence survives in our imaginations today.

From the native peoples the Spanish adopted the *curandera*, a spiritual healer who uses herbs and plants to cure the sick. The *curandera* preserves ancient traditions handed down from one generation to the next through personal teaching and oral tradition. The *curandera* is a kind of shaman, a person of insight and sensitivity who learns the healing arts from a master teacher, often a relative or a distinguished person of wisdom and age in the community. Rituals include steeping herbs in water to prepare special teas, or mashing herbs into a compress to heal wounds. Because the Spanish adopted these healing traditions from the Native Americans, the *curandera* also represents the point of intersection where culture was exchanged and shared by people of different religions. From their indigenous ancestors, New Mexicans inherited not only a reverence for the great spirit that unites all living things on earth, but also a desire to know this spirit intimately. The work of the *curandera* acknowledges the spiritual connections among plants, earth, people, and dreams, weaving a tapestry of mystery and sacred magic that remains important to New Mexicans to this day.

Teaching Resources

Books

Augenbraun, Harold and Illan Stavans, eds. *Growing Up Latino: Memoirs and Stories*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993.

Baeza, Abelardo. *Man of Aztlan: A Biography of Rudolfo Anaya*. Austin: Eakin Press, 2001.

González, Ray, ed. *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront Their Manhood*. New York: Anchor Books, 1996.

Hoxie, Frederick E., Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell, eds. *American Nations: Encounters in Indian Country, 1850 to the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2001.

McBrien, Richard P., general ed. and Harold W. Attridge ... [et al.], associate eds. *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

Meyer, Michael C., William L. Sherman and Susan M. Deeds. *The Course of Mexican History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Olmos, Margarite Fernandez. *Rudolfo A. Anaya: A Critical Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

Web sites

Rudolfo Anaya:

http://www.gale.com/free_resources/chh/bio/anaya_r.htm

Profile of the author from Thomson-Gale resources

Catechism of the Catholic Church:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/ccc_toc.htm

The Vatican's official publication of Catholic doctrine

New Mexican History:

<http://www.newmexico.org/go/loc/about/page/about-history.html>

The New Mexico Tourist Board:

http://www.newmexicohistory.org/home_html.html

New Mexico Office of the State Historian

American Memory from the Library of Congress:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/browse/index.html>

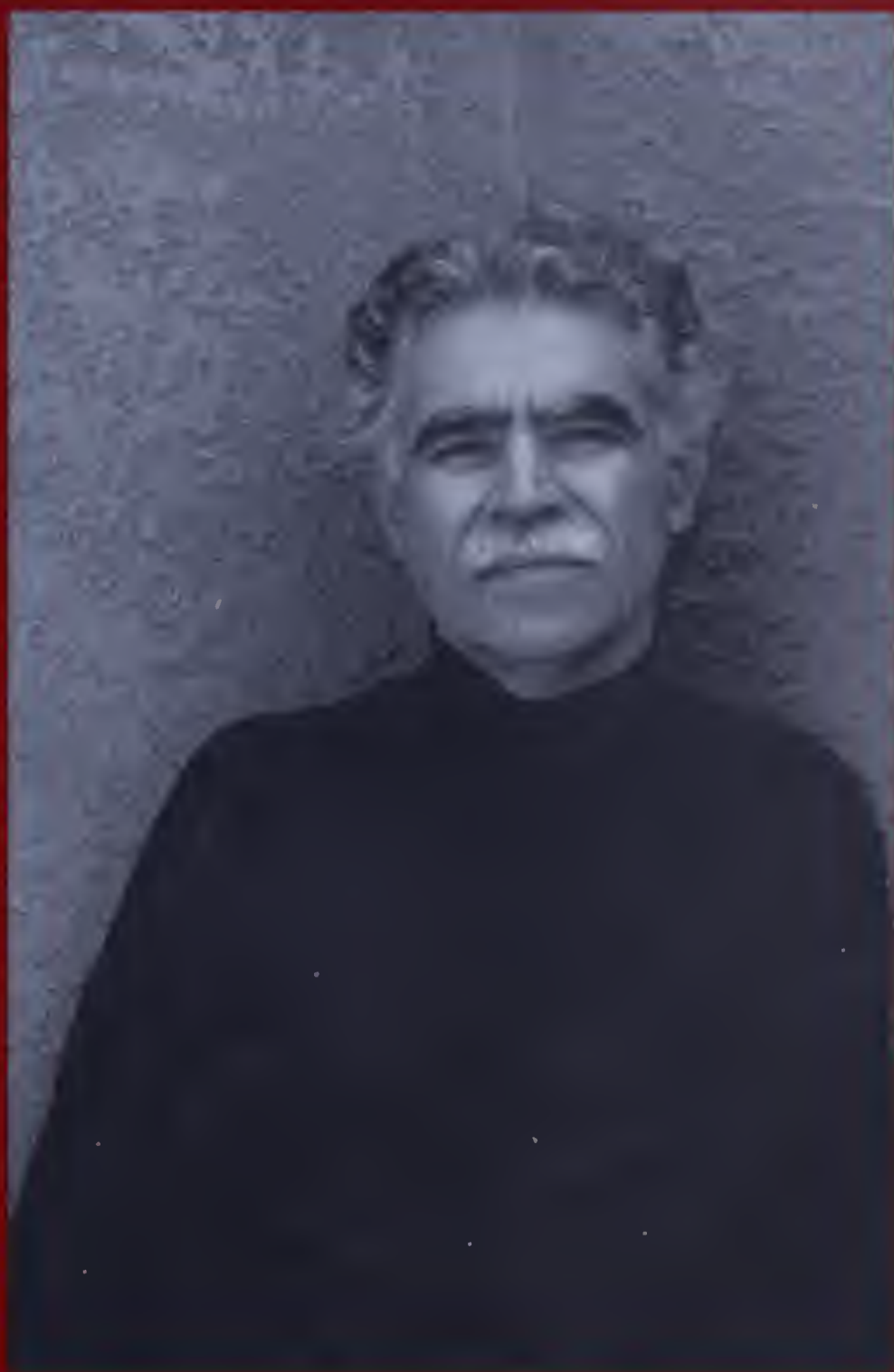
Large database of photographs with documentation of Native American life and the landscape of the Southwest in the early 20th century

NCTE Standards

National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Standards*

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

* This guide was developed with NCTE Standards and State Language Arts Standards in mind. Use these standards to guide and develop your application of the curriculum.



**"A novel is not written to explain
a culture, it creates its own."**

—RUDOLFO ANAYA

“There are so many dreams to be fulfilled, but Ultima says a man’s destiny must unfold itself like a flower, with only the sun and the earth and water making it blossom.”

—RUDOLFO ANAYA

Antonio in *Bless Me, Ultima*

**NATIONAL
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The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest. The Big Read brings together partners across the country to encourage reading for pleasure and enlightenment.

A great nation deserves great art.



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